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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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By the time you read this week's issue, I'll likely have just returned from a final "farewell" bash that my colleagues put together for me. The congratulatory parties at work were enjoyable, but the massive "let's go out for food and drinks after your final day" was much better. The opportunity to spend some time with friends and co-workers outside of the workplace, a chance to let us unwind without worrying about work issues - to just be able to remember the good times and whatever else we want. It will be a great time, I'm sure. As I've mentioned over the past couple of weeks, just getting to the point to decide to resign my position after almost 30 years was kind of tough. As time went by since, my entire persona has changed for the better; I'm more myself again. I made the right decision, and I'm really happy that I took this route. It's Spring, the weather is getting better all the time, and I'm really looking forward to getting in some mindless work and relaxation! The work in and outside of the house is really looking good to me right now. And the opportunity to play some golf, enjoy a few cold beers, and sleep in for a change is a bonus. So, for the moment, I'll be enjoying some temporary "retirement" and see how life from the "dark side" feels like! Maybe I'll have a resurgence of some better editorial ideas like the good old days, too!

Until next time...

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PeST_040 PS2 Mouse Interface Released

Hi All,

The PeST_040 PS2 mouse interface is ready for sale on eBay;
http://cgi.ebay.co.uk/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=8802372433

For those that haven't heard of PeST, it's a buy it now interface which plugs straight into your Atari ST and allows you to use a standard PS2 mouse as would be used on your Windows PC. No extra bits of configuration or wires are required and the device works straight out of the box. Several scaling modes are also available to either speed up or slow down your mouse pointer.

There are about 100 users of the older PeST_030 out there, the 030 version was slightly larger and this new version is smaller using SMD components.

Delivery is available worldwide via tracked post and takes about 6-7 working days to ship to the USA, I'm in the UK.

Thanks so much to all those that bought and supported me before, without whom these new ones wouldn't be possible.

All the best,

techie_alison

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. It's been another hectic week, and I'm glad that it's almost over. Of course, by the time you read this, it'll be the weekend. So what the heck... celebrate a little!

I haven't got a lot to say this week, so we're going to get to the meat and potatoes of the column in short order. That might be nice for a change, huh?

Well, let's get to it then. There aren't a lot of posts, but more than there have been for the past couple of weeks, and I'm sure that SOMETHING interesting will show up. Let's see....

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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'Dave' asks for help with getting his TT to boot:

"I have an Atari TT which usually has just the vanilla GEM desktop running on it. The other day I decided to boot it using MagiC which is installed on the C drive. MagiC promptly crashed the machine and I'm now unable to boot from the HD.

Tried holding C, D, E... when booting to force a boot from one of those drives but it does not work. Boots fine from floppy but can't access the "corrupt" drives. Knife ST only reports 'A' as being available.

HD does make a noise but the light stays off.

Anyone got any ideas on how to get back onto the 'C' drive or tools I might use to see if the HD is fried?"

If there’s a hard drive involved, then there’s on guy you want to hear from before anyone else. That’s Dr. Uwe Seimet, author of HD Driver. Uwe tells Dave:

"First you should check whether your drive is recognized when running an ID check. Only when the drive is found will a hard disk driver be able to find any partitions on it.
In case your drive is found but no partitions can be accessed the drive’s root sector might be corrupted. Depending on how the drive was partitioned the root sector information can either be restored automatically by the software used for partitioning the drive or by other tools."

Dave tells Uwe:

"ID Check reports devices ACSI 0...7 & SCSI 0...7.1, no errors.
The drives(s) was partitioned using HD Driver v6.
Does it look like I’m looking at a corrupted hard disk driver?"

Uwe replies:

"Does the ID check report any *devices*, i.e. devices names? Or does it just give you the list of bus names, without anything else?
Note that the ID check in HDDRIVER 8.1 is more sophisticated, and for checking IDs the demo version of HDDRIVER 8.1 (http://www.seimet.de/hddriver_english.html) will also do. It’s probably a good idea to use the demo for the check in your case.

First we have to know whether any device is actually found, see my note above. If no device is found there is something wrong with the hardware.

If the hard disk device is found but no partitions are detected the root sector may be corrupted. Current versions of HDDRIVER write a duplicate of the root sector to the drive, which can be used to restore the actual root sector. I am not sure anymore, though, if HDDRIVER 6 also does it this way, because it is rather old. The manual provides information on that.

As already mentioned by others the bootable hard disk driver is usually (but not necessarily) located on partition C:. If the root sector is corrupted no partition data is available, i.e. the hard disk driver cannot be loaded and booting from hard disk fails.

There is no mechanism to install a hard disk driver on a floppy, by the way. Just start the driver from the AUTO folder (hddriver.prg is located there) when booting or by double-clicking it."

Dave gets creative and asks:

"Just a thought... If the hard disk driver on ’C’ got corrupted then is there any reason I can’t boot from ’D’...’F’? I’ve tried holding down the keys ’D’...’F’ on various boot attempts."

’Chris’ tells Dave:

"Only the C: drive has the driver, once the C: drive is lost the other drives are lost with it."

'Charles' adds:

"I use icd 6 is this what you use for your harddrive.
sometimes my hard drive goes all funny and resetting or re-configuring the boot inf is my only suggestion, these things should really be more stable.

Does yours"bottom" out on large file transfers from disk to hard drive?"

Dave continues on with the particulars:

"I'm not 100% sure which software was used to partition the drive originally. I thought it was HD Driver 6 but I've just found an old boot disk (again does not boot) which has ICD 6 on it.

I won't be able to get at the Atari internals until next week. I'll try all suggestions and get back to the group with the results."

Edward Baiz tells Dave:

"I would boot up the TT using a floppy, run HDDriver and then edit the auto folder of the C partition."

Jim DeClercq adds:

"Been there, done that, several times. First turn off power. Next, do whatever you have to do to get the drive bay loose and flipped back. Unplug the hard drive. Put stuff back until you can turn TT power back on, do so, with HDDriver in the A drive. Or, with ICDBOOT in the A drive. Do what is necessary to run the boot program.

Carefully, plug the drive back in. The power connector will go part way backwards, and make sparks. Do not make sparks. Then run the device check program, and see if the drive is found. If so, you have a booted machine and a found drive, and you can do something to it. If not, you have a source of good refrigerator magnets."

Dave checks things some more and posts:

"Ok still having problems. I've downloaded the demo version of HD Driver 8.1 and copied to a floppy drive.

Put HDDRIVER.PRG & the associated (?) .UPL file in the auto folder, computer freezes when booting up. All I get to see is the copyright message.

Running HDDRIVER.PRG by double clicking from a non-auto folder pretty much has the same result.

Running HDDRUTIL I get the following messages:

* No XDHI support
* No SCSI support

Once it’s finished loading all the options under ’Harddisk’ are greyed out.

Menu Tools | Device check shows...

BUS0 Atari ACSI
BUS1 Atari SCSI

Then freezes up.

Tools | Autoconfiguring has the same result.

ID Check from the HD Driver 6 disk reports ACSI 0...7 & SCSI 0...7.1 with *no* descriptions.

Sorry if this is all a bit lame but there is no manual on the v6 disk, its an original but the previous owner seems to have added other stuff to it."

Uwe tells Dave:

"OK, this means that most likely something is wrong with your hardware. The fact that your machine freezes might be an indication that something is wrong with your TT, not with your hard disk drive.

I suggest that you disconnect your drive, and then run the device check once again. Your machine should not freeze."

Well folks, talk about a one-trick pony, huh? One message thread this week that ’panned out’. Well, it might be that folks are busy with other things now that spring is here. I’m sure that Dana is spending lots of time out in the yard, making his lawn the talk of the neighborhood. Good for him! We all need something to keep us from going a little bit crazy these days. If all it takes is yard work out in the fresh spring air, more power to ’em!

Anyway, maybe lots of folks that normally post in the newsgroup are busy with ’spring stuff’. Let’s hope they hurry back!

See ya next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Revolution Becomes "Wii"!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" New Castlevania for DS!
’Odama’: Glorified Pinball!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Nintendo Names New Video Game Console "Wii"

Nintendo Co. Ltd on Thursday said it has named its new video game console "Wii, which it said is pronounced "we" to emphasize that the console is for everyone.

The console up until now has been known by its code-name "Revolution."

"While the code-name Revolution expressed our direction, Wii represents the answer," spokeswoman Perrin Kaplan told Reuters.

Nintendo, best known for its Game Boy portable video players, aims to gain share in the $25 billion global video game market now dominated by Sony Corp.

Microsoft Corp. launched its next-generation Xbox 360 console late last year and Sony’s new PlayStation 3 is due in November. Wii also is expected to hit store shelves later this year.

While the new consoles from Microsoft and Sony boast more power and high-definition graphics, Nintendo’s goal is to roll out a machine that appeals to a broader audience than the young males who make up the traditional console gaming market.

A key feature of the Wii is its one-handed controller that looks like a television remote control and uses motion-detection sensors that allow players to control the game by wielding it like a sword, waving it like a conductor’s baton, or swinging it like a baseball bat.

New Castlevania Game for DS Announced

Konami Digital Entertainment GmbH’s ever popular Castlevania series returns to Nintendo DS in November, with the release of Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin for the handheld.

Created by Koji Igarashi, who devised the long-running series, Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin gives the player control of two different characters. The pair - vampire hunter Jonathan Morris and Charlotte Orlean, a young girl with magical abilities - must work to thwart a plan to resurrect Dracula’s Castle and unleash a reign of evil upon the unsuspecting world, all within

a new World War II setting.

The new setting captures the chaos and suffering the era, with thousands of lost souls wandering the world in search of salvation. Desperate to escape the limbo within their exist, the misguided spirits seek to rebuild Dracula’s Castle from its ruins, and are lead by a pair of evil Vampire sisters out to resurrect their master’s home for their own nefarious plans. Thrown together, Jonathan and Charlotte must combine their unusual skill sets to defeat the plans and restore harmony.

Retaining the same 2D platform realms for which the series is famed, Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin uses a side-on view to oversee the scrolling stages. Players can switch freely between Jonathan and Charlotte as they progress through the levels, using their skills when appropriate. In addition to Jonathan’s weapon expertise and Charlotte’s spell-casting, both characters can utilise all-new ’Summon’ attacks to raise demons to assist them against the Vampire sisters’ army. Similarly, more conventional weapons can also be found on route, and saved for use against the hardier monsters that await in the shadows.

Featuring all-new locations and a cast of over 100 different adversaries, Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin marks a welcome return to the DS for the series. Igarashi’s Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow has already enjoyed massive success for the format, and his new epic is certain to wow Nintendo users when it is released later in the year.

’Odama’ Is Glorified Pinball

Nintendo Co. seems intent on getting gamers to do more than simply tap buttons on a controller. The Nintendo DS handheld has a touch screen and accepts voice commands, and the upcoming Revolution console touts an interesting remote control gamers will be able to wave around, simulating sword strikes or bat swings.

With "Odama," (Rated E10+, $49.99) Nintendo has released a tough, genre-busting title for its aging GameCube console that somehow makes Japanese feudal warriors, pinball and a microphone almost seem normal. Almost.

It’s the year 1539, and Yamanouchi Kagetora is an ambitious young general on the warpath in medieval Japan.

He has troops you can command by barking orders into the included microphone; he has cavalry you can launch at the enemy; and he has a giant Odama - a spherical weapon of legendary power.

By now we all get that Odama is just glorified pinball, right? There’s a lot more going on, actually.

The object of each level is to direct the Odama using the two flippers at the bottom of the screen to crush enemies and other obstacles. Use caution, as you can just as easily flatten your own troops.

At the center of the ensuing chaos is the Ninten Bell, the pride of Kagetora’s army, which gingerly moves from the bottom of the screen to the top.

Your main objective is to get the Ninten Bell through a gate atop each level in the allotted time (usually no more than a few minutes).

All the while, you'll be batting around the Odama to open new paths, unleash reinforcements and add time to the clock.

The game unfolds like any pinball game with a board filled with secret spots, chutes, traps and tunnels. The only difference here is that the board is a battlefield, the chutes and tunnels are paths and rivers. Instead of bumpers, we have fortified towers, walls, trees and homes.

If this review was based solely on originality, "Odama" would receive my highest rating. There's a line where creativity and control should meet, but "Odama" blows right past it.

What began as an entertaining, laugh-out-loud experience became a perplexing, yell-at-the-television bout of frustration.

The issue is with the way this unholy trinity of pinball, warriors and voice commands actually works. It doesn't. Not very well, anyway.

The troops clearly understood my orders to advance, fall back or rally, but they apparently suffer from attention-deficit disorder. I often found my yells of "advance!" or "rally!" devolving into shouts of certain four-letter words after the warriors forgot what to do the umpteenth time.

Controls aside, this is one of the hardest games I've played in a long time. The skill level here is brutal and unforgiving, requiring you to master each step of each level with a clock maker's precision.

Yet I keep on playing, somehow hoping I can make it to the next level. "Odama" is close to perfect for the video gaming masochist with an addictive personality.

It's not for everyone, but this is the sort of oddball game that seems destined to grow in popularity, if only because of its peculiarities.

Two and a half stars out of four.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Symantec Expands Anti-Phishing Efforts

Symantec is planning to revamp the Phish Report Network, an online project aimed at cutting down on phishing identity theft attacks.

The security vendor said it will unveil a new design for the project's Web site and will add a number of new industry partners, including AOL's Netscape portal and the financial institution, Wells Fargo.

Launched in February 2005, the network was originally sponsored by security vendor WholeSecurity, which Symantec purchased last September. Microsoft, eBay, and Visa International had signed on as founding members, but it was unclear whether Symantec intended to continue the project following the WholeSecurity acquisition.

The service, which will be relaunched next week, aggregates reports of new phishing attacks and sells access to a database of known phishing sites, but to date it has not been widely used.

More efforts are going to combat phishing, with the most prominent initiative being the Anti-Phishing Working Group (APWG), a nonprofit organization that provides similar services to the Phish Report Network, and which includes about 1500 member companies, according to APWG Chairman Dave Jevans.

Additionally, two other antiphishing sites launched last month: The volunteer-run Phishing Incident Reporting and Termination Squad, as well as PhishRegistry.org, a service that warns legitimate Web sites when they are being spoofed by phishers.

The growth in antiphishing sites is being spurred by an increase in phishing attacks, which have doubled in the past year, according to Jevans. "In March we saw around 18,0000 unique phishing attacks and about 12,000 unique phishing sites," he said.

Though Netscape’s parent company, AOL is already a member of the APWG, an AOL spokesman said it couldn’t hurt to join the Symantec project as well. There is "more than [enough] room for one good group," he said.

Asia Now Top Spam-Relaying Region

Asia has overtaken North America to become the top spam-relaying region in the world, according to a report released on Thursday by Internet security firm Sophos. Nearly one-half the spam Sophos captured on its global spam-monitoring network originated in Asia, with North America coming in a distant second as the source of just over 25 percent of spam.

As recently as two years ago, the U.S. was responsible for the majority of spam sent around the world, said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant for Sophos.

"More and more viruses, worms, and Trojan horses are being designed to take over innocent users’ computers with the intention of stealing information and sending out junk e-mail campaigns," he said. That the U.S. has cut the amount of spam it generates in half is evidence that more Americans are now aware of the need to "protect their home computers from malicious hackers."

Sophos credits legislation, such as the CAN-SPAM Act, and greater information sharing by Internet service providers (ISPs) as central to the reduction in U.S.-generated spam. The imposition of harsh penalties and severe fines leveled against the country’s most prolific spammers also has helped, Cluley said.

He noted that the majority of spam is sent illegally from hacked third-party computers. During the first few months of 2006, several people

who admitted responsibility for distributing massive quantities of porn spam also acknowledged involvement in criminal spam rings, Cluley pointed out.

"We're seeing spammers being successfully brought to justice in the U.S., but it's important to remember that they can be based anywhere in the world," he said. "In fact, the vast majority of spam is generated from zombie computers - hijacked PCs infected by malware."

The increasing awareness of ways to stop spam in the U.S. has had an unintended consequence on the rest of world. Unable to conduct their illegal schemes here in the U.S. without risking severe fines or punishment, spammers have taken their operations to other countries.

"Europe is in danger of overtaking North America as the second-worst spam-relaying part of the world," Cluley explained. "This continental shift is inevitable because as North America's percentage continues to fall, the rest of the world is witnessing a rise."

While legislation can help, it is not the best way to stop spam, Cluley said, noting that it is a red herring to think, for example, that firmer action by the authorities in China would stem the flow of spam there because much of it is sent from other regions of the world and simply relayed through compromised Chinese computers.

The best solution to the problem of spam, according to Cluley, is in the hands of home and business PC users.

"What's needed is for home users to better protect their computers with automatically updated antivirus software, operating system patches, and decent firewalls," Cluley said. "It is imperative that computer users worldwide put better defenses in place to prevent their computers from being converted into spam-spewing zombies."

Trojan Freezes Computer, Demands Ransom

A new kind of malware circulating on the Internet freezes a computer and then asks for a ransom paid through the Western Union Holdings money transfer service.

A sample of the Trojan horse virus was sent to Sophos, a security vendor, said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant. The malware, which Sophos named Troj/Ransom-A, is one of only a few viruses so far that have asked for a ransom in exchange for releasing control of a computer, Cluley said.

The new Trojan falls into a class of viruses described as "ransomware." The schemes had been seen in Russia, but the first one appeared in English just last month.

"It is a new kind of malware with a particularly nasty payload," Cluley said.

It's unclear how the Trojan is being spread, although Sophos is investigating, Cluley said. Viruses can be spread in several ways, including through spam or a so-called drive-by download that exploits a browser vulnerability when a user visits a malicious Web site.

Once run, the Trojan freezes the computer, displaying a message saying files are being deleted every 30 minutes. It then gives instructions on how to send $10.99 via Western Union to free the computer.

Hitting the control, alt, and delete keys will not affect the bug, the virus writer warns. Sophos provides further details at its Web site.

The virus writer even offers tech support, Cluley said. If the method of unlocking the computer doesn't work after the money is sent, the virus writer promises to research the problem and includes an e-mail address.

Last month, a Trojan emerged that encrypts a user's documents and then leaves a file demanding $300 in exchange for the password to access the information. Victims were instructed to send money to one of 99 accounts run by e-gold, a company that runs a money transfer site.

The password, however, was contained on the infected computer. Sophos cracked it and publicly released it.

EU Draft Law To Recommend Jail for Pirating Goods

The European Commission is set to recommend on Wednesday common European sanctions against counterfeiting and piracy of goods, including at least four years in prison and a 300,000 euro ($372,700) fine.

The seizure of counterfeited goods at the borders of the European Union increased by 1,000 percent between 1998 and 2004, with 103 million counterfeited and pirated items seized in 2004, Commission figures show.

Different penalties in the 25 EU countries make it difficult to combat counterfeiting and piracy effectively, says the EU executive in the draft legislation, obtained by Reuters.

The draft legislation deals only with sanctions for infringements of intellectual property rights on a commercial scale, and not downloading of music via the Internet for private use.

The EU executive recommends that offences should be punishable by at least 4 years' jail and a fine of at least 100,000 to 300,000 euros. The fine should be higher when there is a health or safety risk.

Other possible measures are the confiscation or destruction of the objects, and a permanent or temporary ban on offenders from engaging in commercial activities.

The draft legislation is a revised version of a text tabled last year by the EU executive, with a tougher legal base with which EU countries could be brought to court if they fail to implement the common sanctions, an EU official said.

The EU and the United States are exerting growing pressure on China, considered as one of the main sources of counterfeiting. U.S. industry groups estimate 90 percent of DVDs, music CDs and software sold in China are pirated.

The United States warned on Tuesday that they did not rule out complaining to the World Trade Organization against China.

The draft legislation is to be adopted jointly by EU governments and the European Parliament.

Apple To Ship New MacBook to Stores Next Week

Apple Computer Inc. on Monday said a new 17-inch version of its MacBook Pro laptop computer would begin shipping to stores next week.

The MacBook Pro, first introduced in January with a 15-inch display, replaces Apple's PowerBook line of laptops and uses Intel Corp.'s Core Duo computer chip for a processing speed three to four times faster than the PowerBook.

Apple said the new version weighs 6.8 pounds and will sell at a retail price of about $2,799.

Seagate Introduces Monster Hard Drive

Running out of room on your PC for storing all those must-have music videos? Not to worry. A new monster hard drive from Seagate has you covered with 750 GB of space.

The new 7,200-rpm Barracuda can hold some 25 DVDs, 50 hours of home video, 15,000 songs, 15,000 digital pictures, and 50 computer games - and still have 300 GB of free space left over.

The record-setting product is based on a cutting-edge technology called "perpendicular recording," a data-storage strategy that stands bits of data on the end of a disk rather than on the flat surface of the media as with traditional recording technologies.

Perpendicular recording provides up to a five-fold increase in storage capacity over earlier magnetic-recording techniques, according to Seagate spokesperson Michael Hall.

By allowing more data bits to pass under the drive head in the same amount of time, the new technology also increases data throughput without having to increase the disk's rotation speed.

"This is the first major upgrade for recording data on disk drives since the first drive was created by IBM 50 years ago," Hall said. Until perpendicular-recording technology arrived, he explained, manufacturers had to reduce the size of data bits to increase storage capacity.

"The problem is that each bit is magnetized, and, as they get smaller, they lose their magnetic power and become unstable, causing a potential loss of data," he noted.

In fact, he added, the capacity of drives that are based on horizontal-recording technology has reached its limit.

Applications for the new technology extend beyond laptop and desktop machines to include digital-music players, mobile phones, and even

business-class hard drives.

Hall suggested that the new Barracuda drive will find its way into high-performance PCs and workstations, external storage products, and even servers.

"This is a significant breakthrough for the hard-drive industry because the longitudinal recording technology has been extended as far as possible," said John Rydning, research manager at IDC. "It sets the stage for further data capacity increases in 3.5-inch and 2.5-inch products."

EBay Launches Online Store to Sell Items

To attract more shoppers, online auctioneer eBay Inc. on Monday launched "eBay Express," an online store to sell new items ranging from cookware and books to electronics - all with no bidding involved.

The new store will feature a subset of items from merchants who already hawk new products at fixed prices on eBay. But unlike the regular eBay setup, purchased items from multiple sellers on eBay Express can all be placed into a single shopping cart, mirroring the checkout systems used by more conventional Internet shopping sites.

Express shoppers also would not have to wait for an auction-style listing to end - a wait that can take days. Items could be purchased with either PayPal, eBay’s online payment service, or a credit card.

"We wanted to build a shopping experience toward convenience-oriented buyers who wanted to buy new items and make the purchases really quickly," said Jamie Iannone, eBay’s senior director of product marketing.

More than 10 million items were available at the Express store’s launch, Iannone said.

The offering, which will be initially available only in the United States, comes as the e-commerce giant faces stiffening competition.

San Jose-based eBay sold about $12.5 billion worth of merchandise during the fiscal first quarter that ended in March, up 18 percent from the year-ago period. Its registered users increased 31 percent to 192.9 million in the quarter.

But eBay has seen its stock price plunge by more than 30 percent from its highs reached in late 2004 as its once high-flying growth has slowed.

The Express store "is a window into the larger eBay marketplace," said eBay spokesman Brad Williams. "We think it’ll attract those who have never tried eBay before because it’s more of a traditional e-commerce site."

EBay merchants, which include individuals and stores, will now be able to display items on both the new Express storefront as well as the traditional listings on eBay.com.

Only qualified merchants who have a history of selling successfully on eBay and meet certain levels of positive feedback scores will be eligible to sell on eBay Express, the company said.

California Agency OKs Broadband-Over-Power-Lines Test

The California Public Utilities Commission approved a plan on Thursday allowing providers of high-speed Internet services to test electricity lines to deliver online access throughout the state.

CPUC commissioner Rachelle Chong, who drafted the plan, said broadband over power lines, or BPL, could become a new competitor to Internet services delivered via telephone, cable and satellites and help reduce prices for consumers.

BPL uses existing utility lines delivering power to neighborhoods to carry broadband signals into homes.

It has been touted by equipment makers and regulators as a possible competitor to cable and telecommunications services, which handle almost all of the roughly 40 million U.S. residential broadband connections.

BPL technology also could allow utilities to develop so- called smart grid applications to more actively monitor and manage the distribution of electricity, said Chong, a former member of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission.

Until recently, U.S. utilities interested in BPL have faced various financial and technical problems. The signals that carry data over electrical lines can cause interference with radio equipment and can travel only a short distance before weakening, requiring repeaters in many areas.

Nevertheless, utilities such as TXU Corp., Texas’s largest utility, and Cinergy Corp. in Ohio are testing the service with privately held BPL provider Current Communications Group, of Germantown, Maryland.

The company also is working on early trials with two California utilities - Edison International’s Southern California Edison subsidiary and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, a municipally-owned utility.

Those projects involve both smart grid applications and BPL Internet services to homes, said Jim Dondero, vice president of marketing at Current Communications.

The regulatory commission adopted guidelines for electric utilities and companies that wish to develop and test projects in California.

The commission turned down an alternative plan that proposed some slightly different regulations.

Among the adopted guidelines, electric utility affiliates and other developers can invest in and operate BPL systems.

Utility affiliates would have to follow CPUC rules for transactions between a utility and a BPL affiliate to protect against cross-subsidies, the commission said.

Companies installing BPL equipment on utility poles also would have to pay a fee for the attachments.

Microsoft to Unveil New Internet Explorer

Microsoft Corp. is releasing a new test version of Internet Explorer, the market-leading Web browser that is facing competition from smaller players.

The new beta, available Tuesday for free download to English-languages customers, includes fixes for problems that were causing Internet Explorer 7 to stop working, said Dean Hachamovitch, general manager in charge of Internet Explorer development.

With the previous test version, Hachamovitch said the most common problems reported involved banking and news sites, in part because of security changes.

Improving security can be tricky since any changes can cause legitimate Web sites to stop working, frustrating users.

Microsoft also added more guidance to help people using IE’s new browser tab functions, which let a user view more than one Web site from within one window, using multiple "tabs."

This is Microsoft’s third beta of Internet Explorer 7 made available to the general public, and Hachamovitch said there are plans for one more. The new version comes amid growing competition from browsers such as Firefox, which has long offered functions such as tabbed browsing. Some also consider other browsers to be more secure, since IE, with its market dominance, is a popular target for attacks.

The final version of Internet Explorer 7 is expected to be released in the second half of this year, around the time a version of Microsoft’s new Windows operating system is expected to be available for business users.

Internet Population Hits New High in U.S.

The U.S. online population has hit an all-time high: 73 percent of adults, or 147 million, now use the Internet.

The figures represent an increase from 66 percent, or 133 million adults, in January 2005, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

But only 42 percent of all adults, or 84 million, have the home high-speed connections important for viewing video and treating the Internet as an always-on reference. Looking only at home Internet users, 62 percent have broadband.

In a report Wednesday, Pew noted that Internet use still varies with age and income.

Eighty-eight percent of adults under 30 go online, compared with 32 percent for those age 65 and older.

Only 53 percent of adults in households earning less than $30,000 a year use the Internet, compared with 91 percent in households with annual income exceeding $75,000.

The telephone-based survey of 4,001 adults, conducted Feb. 15-April 6, has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

Judge: Web-Surfing Worker Can’t Be Fired

Saying surfing the web is equivalent to reading a newspaper or talking on the phone, an administrative law judge has suggested that only a reprimand is appropriate as punishment for a city worker accused of failing to heed warnings to stay off the Internet.

Administrative Law Judge John Spooner reached his decision in the case of Toquir Choudhri, a 14-year veteran of the Department of Education who had been accused of ignoring supervisors who told him to stop browsing the Internet at work.

The ruling came after Mayor Michael Bloomberg fired a worker in the city’s legislative office in Albany earlier this year after he saw the man playing a game of solitaire on his computer.

In his decision, Spooner wrote: "It should be observed that the Internet has become the modern equivalent of a telephone or a daily newspaper, providing a combination of communication and information that most employees use as frequently in their personal lives as for their work."

He added: "For this reason, city agencies permit workers to use a telephone for personal calls, so long as this does not interfere with their overall work performance. Many agencies apply the same standard to the use of the Internet for personal purposes."

Spooner dispensed the lightest possible punishment on Choudhri, a reprimand, after a search of Choudhri’s computer files revealed he had visited several news and travel sites.

Martin Druyan, Choudhri’s lawyer, called the ruling "very reasonable."

Air Force One Subject of Internet Hoax

A startling Internet video that shows someone spraying graffiti on President Bush’s jet looked so authentic that the Air Force wasn’t immediately certain whether the plane had been targeted.

It was all a hoax. No one actually sprayed the slogan "Still Free" on the cowling of Air Force One.

The pranksters responsible for the grainy, two-minute Web video - employed by a New York fashion company - revealed Friday how they pulled it off: a rented 747 in California painted to look almost exactly like Air Force One.

"I wanted to do something culturally significant, wanted to create a real pop-culture moment," said Marc Ecko of Marc Ecko Enterprises. "It’s this completely irreverent, over-the-top thing that could really never happen: this five-dollar can of paint putting a pimple on this Goliath."

The video shows hooded graffiti artists climbing barbed-wire fences and sneaking past guards with dogs to approach the jumbo jet. They spray-paint a slogan associated with free expression.

After the video began circulating on the Web on Tuesday, the Air Force checked to see whether the plane had been vandalized.

"We're looking at it, too," Lt. Col. Bruce Alexander, a spokesman for the Air Mobility Command's 89th Airlift Wing, which operates Air Force One. "It looks very real."

Alexander later confirmed that no such spray-painting had occurred.

Ecko acknowledged Friday that his company had rented a 747 cargo jet at San Bernardino's airport and covertly painted one side to look like Air Force One. Employees signed secrecy agreements and worked inside a giant hangar until the night the video was made. Ecko declined to say how much the stunt cost.

"It's not cheap," he said. "You have to be rich."

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